

Chapter 1

Conceptualizing and Assessing Disasters: An Introduction



Dónal P. O'Mathúna and Bert Gordijn

Abstract This introduction explains the rationale behind the volume at hand against the backdrop of the existing state of the art in research related to disasters and disaster bioethics. The volume offers an overview of how disasters are conceptualized in different academic disciplines relevant to disaster bioethics (Part I), and addresses normative issues that arise in responding to disasters from the perspective of a number of fundamental normative approaches in moral and political philosophy (Part II). Part I aims at identifying and exploring the dominant approaches to basic concepts and categorization criteria of disasters in different academic disciplines, including Philosophy, Theology, Law, Economics, Public Health, Literature Studies, Political Science, and Gender Studies. The eight chapters in Part I provide an introduction to conceptual research in disasters and aim to stimulate further work. It thereby contributes to enhanced awareness and recognition of the real-world importance of basic concepts and disaster criteria. Part II provides a broad range of normative perspectives (Consequentialism, Virtue Ethics, Kantian virtue ethics, Capabilities approach, Deontology, Human Rights and Communitarianism). These chapters are offered as a starting point, not a final conclusion on the topic of disaster ethics. Ethical justification for actions taken in the face of disasters needs recourse to normative traditions and this book aims at setting the stage for more focused normative debates.

Keywords Ethics · Disaster · Consequentialism · Virtue ethics · Capabilities approach · Deontology · Human rights

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The book here presented¹ offers an overview of how disasters are conceptualized in different academic disciplines relevant to disaster bioethics (Part I), and addresses ethical issues that arise in responding to disasters from the perspective of a number of fundamental normative approaches in moral and political philosophy (Part II). In this introduction, we explain the rationale behind the volume at hand against the backdrop of the existing state of the art in research related to disasters and disaster bioethics.

1.1 Part I: Conceptualization of Disasters in Different Disciplines

Disasters are typically viewed as overwhelmingly negative events. However, more thorough analysis reveals that they do not always have exclusively negative consequences. Disasters can provide the impetus for change that brings positive outcomes, such as changes in building practices or regulations when previous ones are shown to be inadequate. Disasters can expose injustice and be the stimulus for reform. They can trigger deeper philosophical and societal reflection that has positive impact. Rebuilding after destruction can have long-term gains, such as how the 1931 earthquake in Napier, New Zealand led to Art Deco architecture that is enjoyed by contemporary tourists. In spite of such examples, the term *disaster* more typically has a negative connotation, and one that is at the extreme end of negativity.

At the same time, it is not immediately obvious which events qualify as disasters and which incidents should be deemed to be ineligible. Lack of a consistent definition is not just a challenge for those who seek conceptual clarity. While academics debate different views, the concern is not just academic. Different concepts and definitions are used in identifying and forecasting disasters, and humanitarian agencies make response decisions based on different concepts. If international aid is predicated on an event fitting a certain definition of a disaster, that definition and the concepts it is based on, have very practical implications. Equally, different notions are used to track the impact of disaster responses. But if disasters are seen as events that primarily arise suddenly and unexpectedly, the chronic conditions that precede them or the long-term impact of the disaster and its response, may not be examined. Finally, little conceptual unity exists across legal documents, policy guidelines and disaster scholarship. And yet, stipulating the necessary and sufficient requirements for an event to be counted as a disaster is crucial, to ensure those laws and guidelines are implemented appropriately.

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Hence Part I of this book aims at identifying and exploring the dominant approaches to basic concepts and categorization criteria of disasters in different academic disciplines, including Philosophy, Theology, Law, Economics, Public Health, Literature Studies, Political Science, and Gender Studies. Other disciplines could have been included, such as History, Sociology, and Medicine. A balance had to be found between being all-encompassing and providing a manageable overview of a number of fields. Many other topics could be addressed, and subsequent scholarship should fill these gaps. The eight chapters in Part I provide an introduction to conceptual research in disasters and aim to stimulate further work. It thereby contributes to enhanced awareness and recognition of the real-world importance of basic concepts and disaster criteria.

As conceptualization is a philosophical enterprise, it is fitting to start with Per Sandin's chapter on philosophical perspectives. He contends that while disasters have been defined, relatively little philosophical analysis has occurred. At the same time, disasters have triggered much philosophical reflection since at least the ancient Greek philosophers. Sandin reviews some contemporary philosophical work on disasters, particularly that linked to ethics and political philosophy. Sandin concludes by proposing a number of areas in which disaster research could gain profitably by further engagement with philosophy. Particular areas include reflection on risk, social psychology, typologies of disasters, and environmental apocalypse.

Just as disasters have led to philosophical reflection, they have led to much theological analysis. This field is examined by Dónal P. O'Mathúna, who limits his analysis mainly to Christian theology. Disasters have led to much theological reflection as they raise the practical question of why God would allow such things. The occurrence of events of such largescale destruction appear to clash with theological notions that a loving God cares for humans. Hence, disasters are particularly challenging for religions that invoke a personal and loving God, such as Christianity. O'Mathúna applies theological reasoning on the problems of evil and suffering to disasters, and reviews some of the proposals developed within the field of theodicy. He concludes that theology has provided ways to sustain belief in God in spite of the existence of disasters, which links into the possibility that good can come even from things as terrible as disasters.

Kristian Cedervall Lauta takes as his starting point the move away from theological reflection on disasters to legal perspectives. Rather than questioning why God allowed a disaster, recent legal perspectives have focused on human responsibility for disasters. Lauta notes the increasing number of legal cases around the world involving disasters, with a particular focus on compensating victims. He sees three characteristics in the trend. One is the serious losses involved for victims, the second is the complexity of these events, and the third are what he calls 'the tricky distinctions' that must be made. Lauta holds that these distinctions are peculiar to legal cases involving disasters, and they generate controversy because of ambiguity in our understanding of central concepts like science, agency and culture. He uses the case involving the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake in Italy to illustrate his perspective. Disasters thus challenge society to address the lack of conceptual clarity on categories central to how wealth and justice are distributed in society.

Ilan Noy addresses economics and disasters, noting that economics as a discipline gives relatively little attention to language and terminology. A clear definition of what is meant by a disaster is not usually found in economic analyses, nor have the ethical issues behind such analyses been examined broadly. However, Noy holds that the way forward is to examine those areas where disagreement exists among economists when they address disasters and their ethical issues. Noy examines controversies around two issues, price gouging and post-disaster economic recovery, to show different approaches to disasters within the economics literature. Price gouging involves inflating prices during periods of scarcity and explicitly involves ethical perspectives on distributing scarce resources. While many find price gouging inherently unethical, Noy reviews economic arguments both supporting and rejecting such practices. He finds little empirical evidence to support either perspective, and then examines the practical challenges for laws concerning price gouging. Noy then addresses economic perspectives on long-term recovery after disasters. Many of the approaches are based on consequentialist assumptions, and yet these have serious limitations. However, few alternatives are available, pointing to the need for further conceptual research on economic perspectives on disasters.

The political dimensions of disasters have arisen in earlier chapters, but are examined in detail by Robert DeLeo. He reviews some historical examples of the inextricable link between politics and disasters. In some cases, smart governance helped to put in place good strategies that mitigated the consequences of disasters, but examples abound of political failures also. As with other fields, disasters are conceived conceptually in different ways across the political sciences, and within its subfields. What is widely recognised is that disasters are social constructs. As such, political decisions impact the vulnerability and resilience of communities towards disasters. At the same time, disasters impact the electoral process and can either strengthen or weaken political power and shape policy change. DeLeo explores these interconnections within three streams of political science research: the policy implications of disasters, the electoral implications of disasters, and disaster risk management. Within each area, political scientists have used disasters to advance prominent political science theories and at the same time informed practical debates on how to apply political theory to all phases of disaster preparation and response. Gaps remain, particularly around the challenges and opportunities for approaches to policy-making regarding anticipated events. In addition, further attention needs to be given to the importance of language in shaping policy debates and the narrative dimensions of disasters.

Narratives have conceptualised disasters since ancient times. Jan Helge Solbakk explores how this occurred in ancient Greek tragedy, finding that the ethical dimensions of disasters were at the centre of this genre. Solbakk uses Greek tragedy as a paradigm for recurrent patterns of attitudes and behavior that come to life when disasters are caused by humans or gods. He finds a number of patterns in several tragedies set in the aftermath of war. Frequently, mention is given of moral degradations and crimes committed by victors on the vanquished. At the same time, homecoming for the veteran soldier can be very difficult, often with tragic consequences. Another pattern seen in Greek tragedy is the deep impact of war on women and

children, both on and off the battlefield. The violence committed against women and children in Greek tragedy reads just like contemporary news headlines. In this way, Solbakk argues that such narratives continue to offer much to our understanding of ethics and disasters. A narrative approach to disaster ethics has much more to contribute than has not yet been explored.

Ayesha Ahmad focuses on the analysis of disasters and women. The field of gender studies views disasters as gender-constructed processes. It brings to the fore the backdrop of gender inequalities and their impact on how disasters are conceptualised. Given the level of violence, injury and death inflicted on women during and after disasters, this perspective argues that gender must be considered an integral factor in conceptualising and responding to disasters. This brings an explicitly ethical dimension as it informs humanitarian responses and policies that aim to protect individuals in disaster situations. When such policies do not mediate the risks to women in disaster contexts, particularly refugee or internally displaced camps, pre-existing injustices and inequalities can be reinforced. Ahmad concludes that disasters, even when conceptualised from a gender perspective, require a more all-encompassing theoretical framework to account for the lived experiences of individuals in disasters. The aim is to provide more sustainable and long-term approaches to disasters that take appropriate account of gender in societies.

Siri Tellier examines public health in disasters and humanitarian action. The objectives of humanitarian action are rooted in its origins with the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Given its origin in providing healthcare for soldiers, saving lives continues to be a central objective and ethical mandate. Over the last two centuries, many measures of global health and mortality have improved. Tellier examines how this has led to changing conceptualisations of public health and with that, differing approaches to ethical issues. Public health has traditionally relied on utilitarian approaches with its emphasis on the goal of improving the health of the population as much as possible. Tellier finds a number of ethical challenges remain for public health in disasters, particularly decisions about prioritising actions, the limits of humanitarian action within complex social settings, global differences in practice standards, exit strategies, gaining access to various groups, and effective coordination. These issues require substantial further ethical analysis.

1.2 Part II: Basic Moral Theories and Response to Disasters

The above-mentioned conceptual and definitional issues feed into discussions about how normative issues that arise in responding to disasters should be addressed. Nevertheless, supposing we had a broadly accepted definition of disaster, it would obviously not determine how we ought to react from a normative point of view. Being able to answer the question “what is a disaster?” does not imply a specific take on the way in which we should relate to the phenomenon. So what, if any, are our ethical obligations in relation to people struck by disasters? This question has

gained importance because of globalisation. Whereas for most of human history we have been blissfully unaware of the disasters that struck others who did not live in our immediate vicinity, this naïve ignorance has definitely disappeared as a result of the fast development of transportation, information and communication technologies. On the one hand, we seem not to have been provided with a natural inclination to empathise with strangers far away. And yet, nowadays disasters at the other end of the world appear on our television screens as they happen, and we can go anywhere in the world to help within a few days. The resulting normative questions confuse us.

In Part II, therefore, this volume provides a broad range of normative perspectives (Consequentialism, Virtue Ethics, Kantian virtue ethics, Capabilities approach, Deontology, Human Rights and Communitarianism). No volume could hope to include all normative perspectives and still remain a manageable size. While we attempted to include all major approaches, our final selection was determined to some degree by the availability of authors to provide material. In no way do we claim that the perspectives included here are the only relevant ones, or even the most important ones. These chapters are offered as a starting point, not a final conclusion on the topic of disaster ethics. Ethical justification for actions taken in the face of disasters needs recourse to normative traditions and this book aims at setting the stage for more focused normative debates.

Since disasters often involve making decisions for the good of many, Part II opens with a chapter on consequentialism by Vojin Rakić. He argues that consequentialist ethics is often the preferred moral approach in disaster settings where decisions are taken that affect larger numbers of people, not just individuals. This approach is suited to political decision making, especially in the domain of international relations and also in disaster settings. Rakić begins with an historical overview of various approaches to consequentialism. He concludes that in such large-scale contexts, consequentialism is most adequate as a moral theory. However, other situations require different approaches to ethics. He provides case examples, some of which point to situations in which consequentialism is the preferred ethical approach, and others which point out the limitations and problems with consequentialist approaches.

Henk ten Have affirms the importance of saving more lives in disasters, but notes that emergency ethics will accept that not everyone can be saved. This approach can lead to a neglect of other important values, including human dignity, justice, and human rights. Disasters have a way of leading to the neglect and violation of human rights. While some have criticised the adequacy of a human rights approach, ten Have provides reasons to redefine humanitarianism in terms of rights. Ten Have next turns to the concept of vulnerability, a core notion in continental philosophy. Vulnerability has emerged as a key principle in global bioethics, and is especially salient in the context of global disasters. Its usefulness arises in part because it highlights the conditions that produce vulnerability and how these might be ameliorated, rather than focusing on the emergency decisions needed in disasters. The combination of human rights approaches, humanitarianism and vulnerability is advocated by ten Have. He claims this would require a critical reformulation of human rights

discourse, since it often shares the vision of neoliberal approaches and policies of globalization, rather than questioning the negative relationships between social context, trade and human flourishing. Global bioethics, ten Have concludes, can redirect human rights discourse towards the protection of the vulnerable and the prevention of future disasters.

The broader and longer view of disasters is continued by Andrew Crabtree as he applies Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to disasters. Crabtree sees a clear connection between Sen's work and disasters because Sen emphasises the social context in which hazards occur. Sen's early work on famines explored their social dimension, particularly how famines arise not because there is no food, but because certain people in society lack entitlements to food. Sen's early work has been criticised as incomplete, but it overlaps with ten Have's chapter in pointing to the importance of poverty and vulnerability in causing disasters. Crabtree notes that in developing his capabilities approach, Sen moved into a normative framework. Sen points to weaknesses in resource-based approaches, such as Rawlsian views of justice, and end-state approaches, such as consequentialism. Crabtree examines these arguments as he describes the capabilities approach. He finds much to commend this approach to disasters, particularly because of its emphasis on freedoms and agency. However, he notes that Sen has contributed little to reflection on disasters since the 1980s, something Crabtree explores, particularly the relevance of his approach to sustainability. He concludes by examining how the capabilities approach could contribute to normative discussions with disasters, while acknowledging the challenges in such an endeavour.

Paul Voice takes up another perspective which has received relatively little application to disasters: communitarian ethical theory. His chapter aims to philosophically examine the contribution that communitarian ethics might make to disaster ethics and at the same time reflect on its philosophical difficulties and weaknesses. Voice does not present a communitarian ethics template to apply in disasters, but rather uses a communitarian lens to identify ethical issues that other ethical perspectives might underemphasise. Voice begins by describing the main features of communitarianism and its roots in critiquing John Rawls's theory of justice. Instead of Rawls's impartial moral stance, communitarian ethical theory emphasises the social and cultural roots that all people have and which they bring to their ethical decision-making. Voice then focuses on one strand of communitarian thinking: political communitarianism. This approach is sceptical about the value of the state and its agencies, preferring instead local community autonomy. Little has been written on how communitarian ethics applies to disasters, something Voice finds odd given the emphasis on community in disaster literature. He reviews some of these contributions and develops a communitarian perspective on justice and disasters. He then points out several criticisms of this approach, noting that more philosophical work remains to be done in this area.

Virtue ethics has undergone a revival in recent years, which Lars Löfquist argues adds a distinctive and thought-provoking perspective on disasters. His chapter begins with a short introduction to non-religious Western virtue ethics, beginning with Aristotle, and moving through Hume, MacIntyre and Slote. He then provides a

historical overview of the connection between virtues and disasters. He finds two important links, one exploring the morally excellent response we might have in the face of a disaster, and the other being our moral response to a disaster experienced by others. The former is developed by Löfqvist in an exploration of the virtue of resilience, and includes perseverance with this. The latter virtue that responds to others is called humanity by Löfqvist. By this he means a response to the suffering of others which has variously been called beneficence, benevolence and fellow feeling. Turning then to how virtue ethics is examined in the context of disasters, Löfqvist sees three themes. The first consists of general writings that explore the connection between virtue ethics and disasters. Various cases and examples are provided to demonstrate the virtues that are important in disasters. The second theme explores the professional virtues that should exist in humanitarian workers to allow them to meet the moral challenges they face. The third theme concerns the virtues of those suffering a disaster, with a particular emphasis on resilience as a virtue. Löfqvist concludes with suggestions for future work, finding that the virtues are as yet untapped in their potential for contributing to disaster ethics.

Eleni Kalokairinou continues the exploration of virtue ethics and disasters, although she starts from Immanuel Kant's discussion of virtues. She argues that Kant's deontological account is not just a formally ideal ethical theory, but that it also possesses an ethical account of virtues. Kantian deontological virtues are directly applicable to the problems caused by disasters in the real world. Kalokairinou reviews some of the debate over ideal and nonideal moral theories in ethics, and concludes that Kant examined this debate much earlier and concluded that ideal theories were compatible with nonideal approaches. Kalokairinou demonstrates how Kant supplemented his ideal ethical theory with a nonideal one, his theory of virtues. She argues that Kant's explorations in the area of helping those in need and in poor conditions are applicable to contemporary disasters. Kalokairinou shows how Kant developed two duties of virtue, namely the duty of justice and the duty of beneficence. She shows that these are very applicable to the real-world ethical dilemmas in disasters. Kalokairinou concludes that Kant's account is very carefully worked-out and is the right one for dealing with disasters.

The final chapter by Veselin Mitrović and Naomi Zack also examines deontology. Their argument is that many similarities exist between the ethical issues arising during disasters and violent conflicts, and other issues in bioethics that are rarely connected to disasters. Their argument is that all of these bioethical issues involve a failure on the part of some to respond with indignation and therefore lead to apathy towards change. Underlying both of these, they claim, is an absence of deontology. Mitrović and Zack develop two case studies in support of their argument. One involves a picture of social apathy and loss of care towards homeless people in society. The second case involves a group of people pursuing infertility treatment and the changes they undergo in terms of altruism and solidarity. In both cases, there is a loss of altruism which Mitrović and Zack claim leads people into apathy and then to a lack of any sense of obligation to perform their duties to help others. They view apathy as a lack of indignation at an unjust or unethical situation, resulting in indifference towards one's duties. They claim that a more appropriate response to the

suffering of another should lead to an expression of solidarity with the sufferer which then leads to action on the basis of one's duties. In this way, Mitrović and Zack argue that by taking deontology seriously, people will be motivated to respond to those who suffer, including those suffering after disasters.

We trust the chapters in this book will make a valuable contribution to the field of disaster ethics. However, their authors all agree that much more work needs to occur in this area as a whole, and on the specific topics addressed in each chapter. Ethical dilemmas are increasingly recognised as a major element of disaster preparedness and disaster response. It will take careful research and engagement with affected communities to ensure this is done well.

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